



OFF THE PRESS
George Harrar

BOOK REVIEWS

COMPUTERS IN CRISIS

By Jerome T. Murray
and Marilyn J. Murray

The subtitle — "How to Avert the Coming Worldwide Computer Systems Collapse" — teases the reader with the threat of unnamed calamity. As in all good doom-predicting books, there is, of course, the promise of a solution.

The crisis will be triggered on Jan. 1 of the year 2000 by a simple situation: Programs rely on six-digit date fields. Which date is later, 12/31/99 or 01/01/00? Programs would say the first; programmers and everyone else naturally answer the second.

Sixteen years seems sufficient time to solve this problem. But the Murrys foresee trouble: "The true potential for disaster lies in our tendency to procrastinate... our readiness to 'patch' or treat symptoms until it is often too late to [eradicate] successfully the disease."

The disease's course is poetically described: "We may well expect widespread suspension of computer processing in the year 2000 and beyond, with many terminal screens as dark as a villain's heart."

The six-digit dilemma affects almost all industries by disrupting the aging of accounts receivable and payable, pensions, benefits eligibility and so on. It is a user problem, but one that could use vendor help.

The authors write "An Open Letter to Our Leading Vendor" in which they ask, among other changes, "Please replace the current system-generation option for the six-digit IPL date: mm/dd/yy or dd/mm/yy or yy/mm/dd, with the eight-digit option, mmdyyy or ddmmyyy or yyyymmdd."

Even if vendors come to the aid of their users, the conversion still will be a mammoth task of altering data, invading source logic and modifying input protocols. An example is cited of a Fortune 500 company with a library of 50,000 Cobol programs, averaging 750 lines of code each for a total of 37,500,000 total lines. Figuring a productivity rate of 15 debugged lines per day, the authors calculate more than 21 years of work by 500 programmers to rewrite it all.

The book overdramatizes the date-digit problem, in part to draw attention to it. Others have ventured the same thesis more quietly and stirred up little or no interest.

Much of the book can be overlooked. The preface lays out the problem well; Chapter 1 provides interesting background on time and its calculation, and Chapter 11 prescribes a conversion solution for users. Read those sections if nothing else.

Hardcover, 360 pages, \$32.95, ISBN 089439-223-6, Petrocelli Books, Inc., 1101 State Road, Princeton, N.J. 08540.

GETTING STARTED WITH THE IBM PC AND XT

Edited by David Arnold

In partnership with PC World magazine, Simon & Schuster, Inc.

launches the PC World Library with this introduction to IBM's Personal Computer and Personal Computer XT models.

This attractively designed first volume is an unabashedly friendly and positive look at what novice users can do with their new machines. This is a hand-holding book that puts pages of definitions where the reader needs them — before the technical sections rather than tucked away in an appendix.

Future volumes in the PC World-Simon & Schuster series promise to cover desktop applications, communications and hardware for the Personal Computer and XT. Additional books will feature PCjr — how to get started and have fun with it.

Paperback, 183 pages, \$14.95, ISBN 0-671-49277-2, Computer Book

Division, Simon & Schuster, 1230 Ave. of the Americas, New York, N.Y. 10020.

AN INFORMATION SYSTEMS MANIFESTO

By James Martin

There is little reason to paraphrase James Martin. He is that rare writer in the computer field, one who expresses himself clearly and forcefully. He writes:

"What is needed instead is freedom for user areas to employ their own initiative in creating the systems they need, but they still must obey certain laws. They make systems conform to a set of rules that permit them to interchange data, now and in the future."

"Perhaps the most notorious class

of systems that don't work is management information systems.

"It is the job of management to build a computerized corporation, and the foundation stone of that is the data models that are used."

"Prototyping is by far the most effective for giving the user a clear, realistic representation of the system that is to be built."

These quotes reflect this book's
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to providing schedules, qualifying information and personal messages to the participants themselves.

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